

MORE THAN TEMPORARY?

*An evaluation of the accommodation
of people sleeping rough in inner city
Sydney during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Prepared by the Centre for Social Impact UNSW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, commissioned by Homelessness NSW, presents the findings of the evaluation of the New South Wales (NSW) Government's provision of temporary accommodation to people sleeping rough during the COVID-19 pandemic in inner City Sydney. The report covers the period from the first case of COVID-19 in Australia on January 25th, 2020, until the NSW Government's announcement of the *Together Home* program on 8th of June 2020.

Recognition of the vulnerability of people who were sleeping rough led governments both in Australia and internationally to implement urgent measures to provide emergency or temporary housing to those without it. In NSW, the NSW Government announced a funding package of over \$34 million for homelessness services including \$14 million specifically for the expansion of temporary accommodation services to house people sleeping rough during the pandemic.

The funding provided by the NSW Government in response to the onset of COVID-19 enabled the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to pre-purchase over 380 individual rooms for three months with 22 different accommodation providers across metropolitan Sydney (in addition to hotels already contracted to provide temporary accommodation (NSW Audit Office 2021). Between late March and June 2020, over \$29.0 million was spent on the increased temporary accommodation program- providing 131,000 nights of accommodation to over 13,000 people. (NSW Audit Office 2021). While total numbers for inner city Sydney are difficult to determine, across NSW it is estimated over 1900 people who were sleeping rough were placed in temporary accommodation between 1st April and 19th June 2020. (Pawson et al., 2020)

The report finds that the NSW Government's temporary housing of people who were sleeping rough in inner city Sydney was a significant achievement and one that was an important and effective measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 amongst a highly vulnerable cohort. The report also highlights the high levels of commitment and collaboration between DCJ, NSW Health, peak housing and homelessness agencies and the specialist homelessness sector which facilitated the housing and support of large number of people sleeping rough. The primary vehicle for this collaboration was the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce which built upon pre-existing collaborations and DCJ procedures to effectively coordinate temporary accommodation and support to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney.

Other important, commendable features of the NSW Government's response was the use of higher quality temporary accommodation providers and the increased flexibility in relation to length of time in which a person sleeping rough was eligible to receive temporary housing assistance for.

Unique in the approaches to people sleeping rough during COVID-19 in Australia, was the NSW Government's commitment to providing long term housing for those placed in temporary accommodation. On 8th June, the NSW Government announced the *Together Home* program (Together

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Home) a \$36.1m investment that aims to support people's street sleeping across NSW during the COVID-19 pandemic into stable accommodation, linked to wraparound supports.¹

However, the report also finds limitations in the approach adopted by the NSW Government in inner city Sydney. This includes the delay between when the first cases of COVID-19 arrived in NSW and the implementation of an enhanced temporary accommodation response to people sleeping rough. This delay not only exposed people sleeping rough to potentially adverse health implications but also created confusion for the specialist homelessness sector who felt they received limited information on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 amongst their clients.

The report also finds that the provision of health, food, and other support services to people in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney was done so in a delayed and uncoordinated manner. Whilst this uncoordinated delivery can be attributed to the uncertain and fluctuating nature of the early period of the pandemic, it had considerable impacts upon the well-being of those placed in temporary accommodation. The report also highlights considerable deficiencies in the identification of and provision of support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in temporary accommodation.

¹ Note that in the period since June 2020, the *Together Home* program received additional funding in the November and June NSW20/21 Budgets, providing almost 1000 supportive housing packages for people sleeping rough

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The report covers the period in between two key NSW Government funding announcements- the March 2020 announcement of \$14 million of funding for the temporary accommodation package, and the June 8th announcement of the *Together Home* program to ensure those in temporary accommodation were provided pathways into permanent housing. As such the report does not provide an evaluation of the success of *Together Home* but rather of the accommodation, health and support measures provided to those in temporary accommodation prior to its announcement. While temporary accommodation measures were implemented throughout NSW, the report primarily addresses responses in inner city Sydney.

This report uses the terms ‘people rough sleeping’, ‘street sleepers’ and ‘rough sleepers’ interchangeably- with all terms used to intended to correspond with the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of rough sleeping (persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out) (ABS, 2012).

1.2 Research methods

The following research methods were used in developing this report:

1.2.1 Literature review

To explore responses in the Australian context, a literature review was conducted of publicly available media releases and policy statements released by state and territory governments in relation to the accommodation of people experiencing rough sleeping. Also included in the literature review was material drawn from webinars by the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness and the findings of the *Australian Homelessness Monitor 2020* and the NSW Auditor General’s Report to Parliament, *Responses to homelessness*.

1.2.2 Primary research

The research also involved two primary research components conducted by the Centre for Social Impact (CSI):

- Workshops with a range of stakeholders including representatives of the Department of Communities and Justice², NSW Health Services, peak body representatives and with NGO and

² Note that the policy and program area of DCJ, Housing and Homelessness, were invited but did not participate in the consultations undertaken in preparation for this report.

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local government agencies involved in the provision of support to those in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney during the COVID-19 pandemic (5 workshops conducted)

- In depth interviews with people who were currently or formerly homeless and who are currently or have previously been in temporary accommodation provided by the NSW Government in inner city Sydney during the COVID-19 pandemic (6 interviews conducted)

A third primary research component was undertaken by Homelessness NSW which involved a workshop with Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) providers involved in the provision of accommodation and other services to those in temporary accommodation during COVID-19. Each of these methods is elaborated further in the Appendix.

1.3 Report structure

Chapter Two of the report provides an overview of the onset of COVID-19 and the recognition of the vulnerability of those experiencing homelessness to the virus. It also examines models to accommodate people sleeping rough which were implemented in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand as well as in other states and territories in Australia.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the policies in place to provide outreach and accommodation to people who were sleeping rough in NSW prior to COVID-19 and how they provided a platform for the eventual NSW Government response to COVID-19 in inner city Sydney.

Chapters 4-7 provide a timeline of the key measures implemented by the NSW Government, the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce and SHSs between March and June 2020. The Chapters also analyse these measures noting the strengths and limitations of the approaches adopted.

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2.CHAPTER TWO - COVID-19 AND HOMELESSNESS

2.1 Introduction

Since first emerging in 2019, by early 2020 COVID-19 had spread so far as to become recognised as an international public health emergency by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). As the virus spread it became apparent that COVID-19 did not pose equal risks to all parts of society, with some groups at an increased risk of exposure and greater likelihood of severe cases and mortality (Lewer et al., 2020).

One group identified as a particular risk of contracting and being severely impacted by the spread of COVID-19 were those currently experiencing homelessness. People experiencing homelessness (particularly those sleeping rough or what is also termed ‘street sleeping’) were identified to be at increased risk of infection by virtue of their limited capacity to practice social distancing, their limited access to infection prevention measures such as hand sanitizers and masks and reduced ability to self-isolate should they be required to do so (Pawson et al., 2020). The vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness to COVID-19 was also heightened by the higher prevalence of chronic health conditions among the homeless population sleeping rough and in supported accommodation (Flatau et al., 2020).

Recognising the vulnerability of this cohort, in March 2020, Leilani Farha, United Nations Special Rapporteur urged governments to implement measures to prevent anyone falling into homelessness and ensure access to adequate housing for those without it:

Housing has become the front-line defence against the coronavirus...Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation (Farha, 2020).

Another key motivation/pressure for governments to implement responses to homelessness during the pandemic was the belief of a threat posed by homeless populations to the health of the non-homeless population (Pawson et al., 2020). As argued by Parsell et al (2020) governments have long been aware of the chronic health impacts of homelessness and have been reluctant to alter policy or funding to adequately prevent and respond to it. With the arrival of COVID-19, it has been argued that many governments were pushed into implementing policy responses, fearful of the risk that the people experiencing homelessness represented to the healthcare systems and the broader public. (Pawson et al., 2020).

2.2 International Responses

However, regardless of motivation, countries such as England, the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand all implemented specific policy interventions to house those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.

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Table 1: *International responses to COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness.*

Country	Response	Number of people accommodated	Type of Accommodation	Number of people infected with or died from COVID-19
United Kingdom	<p>During the first wave of the pandemic there were 40,000 people in hotels, night shelters and shared accommodation, with another 5,000 people sleeping rough (Townsend, 2020).</p> <p>On March 26th, the UK Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to all local authorities in England instructing them to move everyone sleeping rough and in communal shelters into a safe place (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).</p> <p>This approach became known as the <i>Everyone In Initiative</i> and was supported by \$3.2 million from government funding to assist local authorities to move people experiencing rough sleeping to be able to isolate in hotels (James Hitchings-Hales, 2020).</p>	Approximately 15,000 people who were sleeping rough or at risk of doing were assisted as part of this initiative since the beginning of the crisis (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020)	Temporary accommodation in hotels and motels	16 deaths of people who were homeless from England and Wales (June 26 th) (Georgeson & Martin, 2020)
United States of America	<p>In the United States there was little Federal coordination of approaches to provide accommodation to people who were sleeping rough instead individually states were responsible.</p> <p>Connecticut moved approximately 1,000 people from shelters into hotels with the aim of securing permanent housing (Casey Leins, n.d.).</p> <p>California launched its <i>Project Roomkey Initiative</i> which aimed to secure up 15,000 hotels and motels to accommodate people ('California's Project Roomkey', 2020). This project is one of the first to receive funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency which covered 75% of California's state and local governments (Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020). However,</p>	<p>1,000 people in Connecticut</p> <p>Over 4,300 people in California</p>	Temporary accommodation in hotels and motels	In New York, there were 926 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases in approximately 179 shelter locations with 86 deaths (May 31 st). It was estimated that the COVID-19 mortality rate for sheltered New Yorkers experiencing homelessness was higher (321

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	<p>as of September 2020, the project had only accommodated 30% of its intended target with just over 4,300 people (Smith & Oreskes, 2020).</p> <p>Similar approaches have occurred In North Carolina and Minnesota (Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020) as well as San Francisco securing 4,500 hotel rooms (Nellis, 2020).</p> <p>The city of Seattle, Washington expanded room in shelters to accommodate more people. 1893 spaces were created in shelters which it created more emergency shelters (95 new beds), expanding space in existing shelters to create social distancing (709 expansions spaces), quarantine spaces (432 beds) and spaces for recovery (432 beds) (Weekly, 2020)</p>		Expanded rooms in shelters	deaths per 100,000 people) than the overall rate (200 deaths per 100,000 people) (Routhier & Nortz, 2020)
New Zealand	<p>The New Zealand Government spent approximately \$100 million on accommodating people experiencing homelessness in motels with a total of 1600 units available to people in April 2020 (Sadler, 2020). These motel rooms had a year-long booking, so people would have security until more social housing was built (Graham-McLay, 2020).</p> <p>8,000 more social housing places were budgeted to be built by April 2021 to transition people from temporary accommodation into permanent housing. (Charlotte Graham-McLay, 2020).</p>	1600+ people	Temporary accommodation in motels with yearlong bookings	
Canada	<p>In Canada, provinces and territories were responsible for COVID-19 response. Consequently, four forms of policy responses to homelessness occurred, which included, <i>abandonment, emergency relief, heightened law enforcement and housing led responses</i> (Farha et al., n.d.)</p> <p>Transitioning people into hotels and motels was an approach seen throughout Canada but occurred on the largest scale in Toronto. By 16th March 2020, Toronto had moved more than 3,500 people experiencing homelessness into hotels,</p>	<p>3,500+ people into temporary accommodation</p> <p>2, 000+ people into permanent housing</p>	<p>Temporary accommodation in shelters, hotels and interim housing.</p> <p>Permanent Housing</p>	178 positive cases of COVID-19 among Canadian populations experiencing homelessness (April 26th) (Kozziel et al., 2020)

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	<p>temporary community centre programs, interim and permanent housing (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). The City of Toronto has the largest shelter system in Canada, with approximately 7,000 people occupying shelters every night (City of Toronto, 2020) and over 500 people sleeping rough. Since March 2020, there has been 40 temporary facilities opened to accommodate people. (City of Toronto, 2020).</p> <p>Those who were placed into permanent housing were supported through <i>Canada's Rapid Housing Initiative</i>, which provided them housing allowances and rent-geared-to-income support (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020).</p> <p>For all the considerable success of the approach in Toronto, it was not without controversy. People who refused offers of accommodation during COVID-19 had their tents removed, with City Officials and police using heavy machinery to dismantle encampments where communities were residing (Casey, 2020).</p> <p>Despite its efforts to move people into temporary accommodation, Toronto has seen an increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough over the course of the pandemic (Noble & Coplan, 2020).</p>			
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2.3 Overview of Australian responses

The first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Australia in January 2020. Following the virus's arrival, SHSs, peak agencies and public health experts called upon the Australian Government to implement protections for those experiencing homelessness (Flatau & Hartley, 2020). Australia was at this time criticised for its inadequate preparations for the impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing homelessness, with Associate Professor Lisa Wood arguing in March 2020:

Those working in the sector, and homeless people themselves, feel abandoned as there has been no guidance at all and a lack of proactive action for this vulnerable high-risk group. Both in our national and state governments, homelessness crosses a number of government portfolios, and it seems to be falling through the cracks (Kirby, 2020).

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Particular criticism has been made of the Australian Government's lack of implementation of a national strategy developed to guide responses to homelessness during the pandemic, and to recognise the importance of preventative measures for people experiencing homelessness (Homelessness NSW, 2020).

In the absence of a national strategy to respond to homelessness and COVID-19, state and territory governments adopted a variety of policy and practice measures to both provide temporary accommodation to those currently homeless and to prevent further exits into the homelessness system (Flatau & Hartley, 2020). Responses focused on providing temporary accommodation in hotels/motels to people who were rough sleeping were implemented in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and Victoria (Pawson et al., 2020). The responses in Queensland, South Australia Western Australia, and Victoria are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Australian State responses to COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness

State	Response	Number of people accommodated
Victoria	<p>The response in Victoria included a range of measures such as setting up pop-up homelessness Covid-19 recovery facilities, intensive supports to public housing and purchasing thousands of temporary accommodations (Wynne, 2020).</p> <p>The Victorian Government provided additional funding of \$15 million to support those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, including almost \$6m for hotel accommodation (Victoria Government, 2020).</p> <p>In June 2020, an additional \$9.8 million was allocated to provide temporary hotel accommodation (Save Public Housing Collective, 2020). The <i>Homeless Hotels Emergency</i> response supported people residing in temporary hotel accommodation, which included a community support worker, 24/7 health concierge, alcohol and other drug worker and additional security in the largest hotels across the state (Wynne, 2020).</p> <p>For people in temporary accommodation, the Victorian Government committed to \$150 million <i>From Homelessness to a Home Package</i> which extends current emergency accommodation and provides ongoing support packages with access to long-term housing (Wynne, 2020).</p>	970 former rough sleepers (March – June 2020) (Pawson et al., 2020)
South Australia	<p>In South Australia (SA), the rapid and comprehensive temporary accommodation program was so strong that it resulted in a virtual elimination of rough sleeping in Adelaide (Flatau & Hartley, 2020).</p> <p>Through the COVID-19 Emergency Accommodation Response Service (CEARS) over 500 people who were sleeping rough in</p>	536 former rough sleepers (March – June 2020) (Pawson et al., 2020)

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	<p>Adelaide were housed in local hotels and motels (The Baptist Care SA Team, 2020).</p> <p>The SA government funded \$7.3 million for accommodation services which included \$5.9 million for short-term motel accommodation and support services, as well as funding for staff and to temporarily house Aboriginal peoples who were sleeping rough from remote communities (Lensink, 2020). For example, the Baptist Care SA Team, provided accommodation to 60 Anangu women and children who were unable to return home to the APY lands. The Mylor Adventure Camp, which was closed because of COVID-19, provided a place for Indigenous women and children to participate in cultural activities and community at the campsite (The Baptist Care SA Team, 2020).</p>	
Queensland	<p>On March 25, the Queensland government implemented a \$24.7 million 8-point housing and homelessness plan in response to COVID-19 (Flatau, Hartley et al 2020).</p> <p>Over \$5 Million of this funding was set aside to enable SHSs to provide additional services including motel or hotel accommodation for individuals and families impacted by COVID-19 (Queensland Government, 2020).</p> <p>A further \$1.2 Million of funding was set aside to ‘enhance outreach services to people sleeping rough’ (Queensland Government, 2020). As of June 2020, the Queensland Government reported that more than 2000 individuals and families have received emergency housing assistance through the rapid housing response (Cassidy, 2020).</p> <p>However, the response of the Queensland Government has been criticised as failing to adequately assess the risk and health needs of individuals prior to placing people in temporary accommodation (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020). Concerns were raised particularly in relation to women affected by family violence being placed in the same hotels as perpetrators of violence, and the people managing problematic substance use co-located with individuals engaging in substance use (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020).</p>	380 former rough sleepers (March – June 2020) (Pawson et al., 2020)
Western Australia	<p>A significantly more limited temporary accommodation response was provided by the Western Australia (WA) Government. Unlike the other state approaches listed above, WA did not provide funding for widespread access for people sleeping rough to temporary accommodation (Pawson et al., 2020).</p>	30 former rough sleepers (March – June 2020) (Pawson et al., 2020)

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Instead, it implemented a pilot program which it referred to as ‘Hotels with Hearts’; the program accommodated 30 people who were homeless (Government of Western Australia 2020). However, the pilot was disbanded after only a month, with only half of the temporary accommodation places filled (Pawson et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Expenditure and impact of temporary accommodation responses in Australia

The combined additional funding of these interventions across Victoria, NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia was originally an estimated \$229 million (Parsell et al., 2020); an estimate that now appears as significant underestimate (Flatau & Hartley, 2020). As argued in the Australian Homelessness Monitor, the exact numbers of people experiencing homelessness housed in Australia during COVID-19 is difficult to obtain with certainty (Pawson et al., 2020). The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that over 5,000 people who were sleeping rough or at immediate risk of sleeping rough have been temporarily sheltered in the first eight weeks of the pandemic (AAEH, 2020).

2.4 Conclusion

Those experiencing homelessness were identified as having increased risk of exposure and greater likelihood of contracting severe cases of COVID-19. With continued spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 governments in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States implemented a variety of responses (with varying degrees of success) to provide housing to those currently sleeping rough.

Like Canada, and the United States, Australia did not implement a coordinated, national response to COVID-19 and homelessness. Instead, the Australian Government left responses to the discretion of individual states and territories. Besides NSW (explored below), the Victorian and South Australian Governments implemented the most comprehensive programs to accommodate people sleeping rough during the pandemic. Chapters 4-7 provide a detailed overview of the approach adopted in NSW and examine its strengths and limitations.

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3.CHAPTER THREE - ASSERTIVE OUTREACH IN NSW PRIOR TO COVID-19

3.1 Introduction

It is necessary to view the temporary accommodation responses of the NSW Government during COVID-19 in inner city Sydney in light of the existing frameworks in place to house and support people who are sleeping rough.

In the years prior to COVID-19, rough sleeping in inner city Sydney was becoming increasingly visible. This is reflected in the figures from the 2016 Census, which saw a 37.3% increase from 2011 in the number of people rough sleeping in NSW (compared to a national increase of 13.7%) (ABS, 2018).

In response, DCJ and partner agencies had implemented coordinated outreach mechanisms to provide temporary accommodation and support to people who were sleeping rough in inner city Sydney prior to the pandemic. As outlined by a government interviewee:

There's been a lot of [media] coverage around the department's role with the hotels and expanding the service during COVID... [but it] wasn't starting a whole new programme from scratch.

This chapter examines policy and practice in New South Wales in relation to people who were sleeping rough prior to the commencement of the pandemic. This includes an overview of the NSW Governments commitments in 2019 to reduce 'street sleeping' in NSW by 50% by 2025. Chapter 2 draws on both publicly available media releases and policy statements released by DCJ and from workshops conducted with government representatives.

3.2 Policy underpinnings- NSW Homelessness Strategy

The key framework for the NSW Governments response to homelessness in this period is the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2019-2023* (the Homelessness Strategy). The Homelessness Strategy has three key focus areas:

- build a mainstream service system that is able to intervene early to prevent homelessness and break disadvantage
- increase access to supports, including housing, that prevent homelessness and re-entry into homelessness
- create an integrated, person-centered service system.

Actions under the Homelessness Strategy were resourced with new funding of \$61.4 million and repurposed funding of \$107 million for a total of \$169 million over four years from 2018–19. (NSW Audit Office 2021).

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3.3 The impact of the Martin Place ‘Tent City’ on NSW policy

A key factor in the pre-COVID response to homelessness in NSW was the gradual creation of a ‘homeless encampment’ or ‘Tent City’ in Sydney’s Martin Place in 2017. In the first half of 2017, increasing numbers of people who were sleeping rough congregated at the Eastern end of Martin Place, directly in front of the Reserve Bank of Australia building and near the steps of NSW Parliament House. The Martin Place community ‘unabashedly’ took up public space, erecting tents, building improvised shelters, and running an open-air kitchen (Cook & Hartley, 2018).

Before its removal in August 2017, the ‘Tent City’ had become a ‘political flashpoint’ between the NSW Government and the City of Sydney and generated considerable media coverage, including calls for its immediate removal (Cook & Hartley, 2018). After a period of stand-off between the City of Sydney and the NSW Government, the NSW Government determined that it would offer temporary accommodation to all eligible people who were sleeping rough in Martin Place. To facilitate this, housing staff from DCJ were sent into Martin Place to directly engage with people sleeping rough. In total, over 150 people who were residing in Martin Place were permanently housed (Baker, 2018).

The housing of residents in Martin Place led the NSW Government to adopt a more expanded form of assertive outreach to those people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney (Pawson et al., 2020). As a government interviewee who participated in the Australian Homelessness Monitor outlined prior to Martin Place:

We [previously] sent staff out to people and said, ‘Come into our office in [name of suburb]. We’ll assist you with some temporary accommodation, and we’ll help get you on a pathway,’ and gave out a lot of information and virtually nobody turned up ...[at] our office.

However, as recounted by a government interviewee one of the key learnings from the ‘Tent City’ was the need for DCJ:

to engage with people on the streets where they were rather than expecting them to come into an office....

3.4 The establishment of HOST and HART

In recognition of the importance of assertive outreach to people who are sleeping rough, in June 2017 DCJ established the Homelessness Outreach Support Team (HOST). HOST is a team of DCJ workers who are responsible for the provision of outreach services for people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney. The HOST conducts assertive outreach both on its own and in collaboration with multi-agency groups via the Homelessness Assertive outreach Response Team (HART). HART is led by the City of Sydney and DCJ with members from St Vincent’s Homeless Health, SHSs and non-government services (City of Sydney, 2020). The HOST also runs monthly ‘intensive outreaches’ – also known as ‘hubs’– in which housing and other services come together to provide assistance to people sleeping rough (Homelessness NSW, 2019).

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Key to the work of the HOST is the fast-tracking of clients into temporary accommodation prior to being placed in long term social housing (Homelessness NSW, 2019). By October 2020, this approach had resulted in the housing of some 700 people who had formerly been rough sleeping in inner city Sydney over the three years to 2020 (Pawson et al., 2020). Across NSW, DCJ administrative data indicates that, between 1 April 2020 and 31 January 2021, approximately 20 per cent of the 4,355 people sleeping rough placed in temporary accommodation across NSW were assisted with private rental products (243 people) or housed in social housing (650 people) (NSW Audit Office 2021).

Another important outcome of the work of the HOST was the establishment of more responsive communication lines between DCJ and the SHS sector. As an interviewee from the homelessness sector identified, the creation of HOST allowed:

...services to have a direct link into DCJ. So, they're not having to make the 18 phone calls to get to the right person. HOST can pretty much answer 90% of what's going on which has been great for the sector. It's sped things up a bit.

Whilst recognising its advantages, Homelessness NSW's review of HOST in 2019 found several limitations with the HOST model. These included:

- Insufficient post-crisis support services to ensure people who were housed were supported to sustain their tenancies.
- Reliance on long-term stays in temporary accommodation as the primary means of moving people sleeping rough out of homelessness (With temporary accommodation argued to be unsuitable for anything but very short-term accommodation).
- In prioritising people sleeping rough over other cohorts of people experiencing homelessness, resulting in inequity in housing allocations (Homelessness NSW, 2019).

Following the publication of Homelessness NSW's report, DCJ have provided funding (including under the Supported Transition and Engagement Program) to increase post crisis -supports for people transitioning from rough sleeping into housing. However, SHS stakeholders interviewed for this report indicated that they identified in the period prior to the pandemic the need for further resourcing of post crisis supports to ensure the successful transition of people from rough sleeping to permanent accommodation.

Another key criticism of the outreach approach of DCJ and HOST is that it is conducted in the absence of significant investment in social and affordable housing stock by the NSW Government. Local Government agencies and peak homelessness service providers have argued that to be effective in reducing homelessness (both for people sleeping rough and other categories of people experiencing homelessness), the NSW Government would need to substantially increase its investment in social and affordable housing (City of Sydney, 2020).

As of 30 June, 2020, there were 52,752 applicants on the NSW Housing Register (Productivity Commission, 2021). Across the state, wait times for social housing can be anywhere from three months

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to ten years. Wait times in the Greater Sydney region are commonly five years or more, with wait times ten years or more in the Inner West and Eastern suburbs of Sydney. Research indicates that NSW requires 212,000 new social housing properties over the next 20 years to meet the current shortfall (Lawson et al., 2018). One interviewee from a SHS detailed that the work of HOST without additional social housing being developed was:

Just shuffling the deck chairs on a sinking system. It results in people who are sleeping rough being prioritised while other arguably as vulnerable groups are pushed further down the system and face even longer waiting times to get social housing. People who are sleeping rough make up only a small number of the people experiencing homelessness.

3.5- NSW Premier's Priority

Another key policy framework in NSW prior to COVID-19 was the adoption of reduction in 'street homelessness' as an NSW Government 'Premier's Priority' (DCJ, 2020a). Youth Homelessness had been adopted as Premier's Priority since 2016, with the NSW Government committing to two additional goals regarding street homelessness in 2019:

1. 25% reduction in Sydney by February 2020, using 2017 as the baseline; and
2. 50% reduction by 2025 across NSW, in relation to the 2019 position.

In announcing these commitments, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian indicated:

We have already invested \$1 billion in funding for homelessness services over four years to break the cycle of homelessness, but we cannot become complacent and by signing this agreement we are pushing ourselves to do even more (NSW Government, 2019).

As part of meeting these targets, in November 2019 the *End Street Sleeping Collaboration* worked with DCJ, the City of Sydney, SHS and peak homelessness agencies to undertake Connections Week- a large scale collection of data from people sleeping rough in Inner City Sydney (End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2019b). Using data collected in this week, the End Street Sleeping Collaboration created a measurable census to 'target housing and other support services' for people sleeping rough (End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2019b)

Both government and SHS stakeholders interviewed for this report highlighted the commitments made under the Premier's Priority as being essential factors in leading to the NSW Government's temporary accommodation commitments during the COVID-19 pandemic. One SHS stakeholder who participated in report detailed their belief that:

Having 'ending rough sleeping' as a Premier's Priority meant that we did not have to convince the NSW Government of the need to take action during the pandemic. We had a pre-existing commitment, an understanding of the cohort and challenges involved as well as infrastructure in place to move people into accommodation. Without it we would not have got the funding we did during COVID-19.

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3.6 Conclusion

The Martin Place ‘Tent City’ led the NSW Government to implement an intensive form of assertive outreach to people sleeping rough in the period leading up to the pandemic. While this approach was not without criticism, the NSW Government had successfully provided temporary and permanent housing to many people who had been previously sleeping rough in Inner City Sydney.

The following Chapters examine how the NSW Government used these existing policy frameworks and partnerships in creating its response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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4.CHAPTER FOUR- INITIAL RESPONSE OF THE NSW GOVERNMENT 25 JANUARY – 26 MARCH 2020

4.1 Introduction

As is detailed in Chapter 2, the absence of a national response in Australia left states and territories to develop their own policies to prevent and respond to homelessness during the initial stages of the pandemic.

On 27th March 2020, the NSW Government announced a funding package of over \$34 million for homelessness services including \$14 million specifically for the expansion of temporary accommodation services for those needing assistance (NSW Government a, 2020).

As a result of this increased funding, DCJ was able to accommodate a significant number of people sleeping rough into temporary accommodation during the pandemic. Between late March and June 2020, over \$29.0 million was spent on the increased temporary accommodation program- providing 131,000 nights of accommodation to over 13,000 people. (NSW Audit Office 2021). While total numbers for inner city Sydney are difficult to determine, across NSW it is estimated over 1900 people who were sleeping rough were placed in temporary accommodation between 1st April and 19th June 2020. (Pawson et al., 2020)

DCJ has noted that the type of people accessing accommodation in response to COVID-19 were predominantly men, over the age of 40 and approximately 25-30% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. These demographics were noted as being similar to the demographics of people provided with support pre-COVID (Department of Communities and Justice, 2020).

This report also details point in time data collected by the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce on the number of people in pre-paid and post-paid temporary accommodation. As this data is only point in time, it cannot be used as a reliable estimate of the total numbers of people who were sleeping rough who were in temporary accommodation during this period.

The following Chapters provide an overview of development and implementation of the NSW Government's response to COVID-19 and people sleeping rough.

Briefly, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in NSW occurred in several stages:

- 25 January-17 February: First cases of COVID-19 in NSW
- 18 February-26 March: Initial public orders and interventions
- 27th March-: NSW second COVID-19 stimulus package
- 30th March -: First meeting of Sydney Rough Sleeper COVID-19 Taskforce and further public health regulations introduced

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Chapter 4 covers the first of these two stages- the period following the first cases of COVID-19 in NSW January 2020 to just prior to the second NSW Government stimulus package on 27th March.

This Chapter draws on both publicly available media releases and policy statements released by DCJ and firsthand empirical data drawn from government representatives, SHS and peak homelessness agencies.

4.2 Events and NSW Government responses in this period

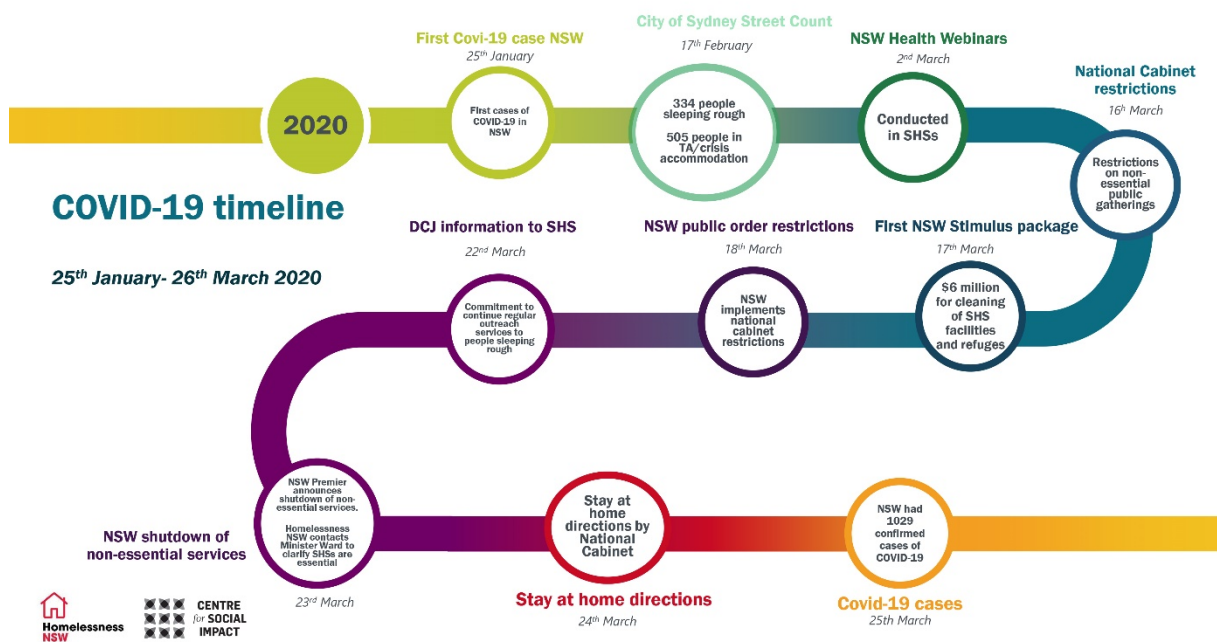


Figure 1: Timetable of events 25th January- 26th March

4.2.1 - 25th January : First cases of COVID-19 in NSW

NSW Health confirmed the first recorded cases of COVID-19 in NSW on the 25th of January 2020 (NSW Health, 2020a). In the period following, the Australian and NSW Governments introduced several regulations to combat the further spread of COVID-19 in the community. No specific actions or recommendations were made to housing and homelessness services at this time.

4.2.2 - 17th February City of Sydney Street Count

On 17th February, the City of Sydney conducted a Street Count of people sleeping rough. The count identified 334 people sleeping rough, with a further 505 people in temporary accommodation (including crisis accommodation). The Street Count is conducted in February and August each year and aims to

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collect accurate and up-to-date information about the number of people sleeping rough in inner-city Sydney. Thus, this assessment was the most comprehensive count of the number of people who were sleeping rough during the initial stages of the pandemic.

4.2.3 - 2nd March: First person-person transmission/ NSW Health commences webinars on COVID-19 in SHSs

On 2nd March, the first person-to-person COVID-19 transmission occurs in NSW (NSW Audit Office 2021).

From 2nd March, NSW Health South-East Sydney Local Health District (SESLHD) and St Vincent's Health Network commence webinars with SHSs focussed on COVID safe practises, such as risk factors, COVID-19 symptoms, questions about PPE and other infection control measures.

SESLHD also commences circulating the *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Bulletin for Specialist Homelessness Services* (the Bulletin) to SHS providers in SESLHD/SLHD geographic area to keep them up to date with key developments and information in relation to COVID-19. The first editions of the Bulletin provide SHSs with information on managing the spread of COVID-19 which had been developed by the Department of Health for aged care and disability settings. Key agencies (including the Intersectoral Homelessness Health Senior Collaborative Alliance) later agreed that the Bulletin would be the primary mechanisms for communication to SHSs in relation to the spread of COVID-19.

4.2.4 – 16th March: Initial public orders and interventions/ DCJ regular communication with sector re COVID commences

From 16th March the National Cabinet (comprising the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers) began introducing measures to restrict non-essential, organised public gatherings (Australian Government 2020). On 18th March, the NSW Government supported the measures announced by the National Cabinet including:

- a ban on non-essential indoor gatherings of 100 people or more (including staff)
- people only considering travel when it is essential and
- social distancing of 1.5 metres (NSW Health, 2020b).

On 16th March, DCJ commences regular communications re COVID-19 with the SHS sector and starts setting up processes to monitor service capacity and changes to service delivery (NSW Audit Office 2021). DCJ also explored options with temporary accommodation providers to support self-isolation for clients where homelessness services could not facilitate this (NSW Audit Office 2021).

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4.2.5 - 17th March- First NSW Stimulus package

On 17th March, the NSW Government announces a \$250 million stimulus package focused on protecting jobs lost as a result of the pandemic. From this stimulus package, DCJ is allocated \$6 Million to fund the cleaning of over 215 crisis refuges and congregate care facilities (NSW DCJ, 2020).

4.2.6 – 22nd March- DCJ provides information to the sector on COVID-19 responses

On 22nd March, DCJ developed information for SHS providers titled *People sleeping rough and COVID-19 – DCJ and homelessness sector response* which recognised:

People sleeping rough are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to a high rate of respiratory and other physical and mental health issues. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

In response, DCJ committed to continuing to undertake its regular assertive outreach via HOST (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

4.2.7 –23rd March -:24th March-Temporary shutting of non-essential services in NSW/ Stay at Home directions

On 23rd March, the NSW Government further expanded upon restrictions, temporarily shutting down ‘non-essential activities and businesses’ (NSW Government, 2020b). Sector representatives interviewed for this report identified considerable confusion before the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services (in consultation with Homelessness NSW) liaised with the Minister of Health to gain confirmation that specialist homelessness services were essential services and were not subject to temporary closure (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, 2020). In a communication to SHSs on 24th March, the DCJ indicated:

Specialist homelessness services are essential. This includes accommodation and support services.

On 24th March the National Cabinet provided additional comprehensive restrictions with Prime Minister Scott Morrison urging Australians to ‘stay at home’ to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Australian Government, 2020).

As detailed in Chapter 3, there were no coordinated national responses developed in relation to homelessness by the national cabinet and people experiencing homelessness were largely not considered in recommendations for ‘stay at home’ orders.

4.2.8 –Cases of COVID in Australia and New South Wales

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By 25th March, international cases of COVID-19 had surpassed 410,000 with almost 19,000 deaths with cases in Australia reaching 2, 432 cases with 9 deaths (Woods, 2020). By 25th March there were a total of 1029 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in NSW (NSW Health 2020).

4.3 –Strengths and limitations of measures in this period

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in NSW on 25th January led to the NSW Government introducing measures to limit its spread.

Stakeholders interviewed for this report identified two related concerns in relation to the measures implemented in this period.

One concern identified by SHS stakeholders was a perceived delay from DCJ in providing them with detailed information regarding how to best prevent spread of COVID amongst the clients. As detailed above, NSW Health commenced a series of webinars in SHSs in inner city Sydney on 2nd March. Coordinated information to SHS only commenced nearly a fortnight later 16th March. In response to this, DCJ identified NSW Health as the lead agency in delivery of health information, with them providing support to NSW Health's role. However clear in discussions with SHSs undertaken for this report was the belief that they required information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery/capacity which they believed DCJ was best placed to provide.

A related concern identified by stakeholders was a delay in DCJ increasing measures to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney in response to the heightened risk of the pandemic. Representatives from DCJ consulted for this report identified the continuation of outreach activities to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney during this period. They also indicated that during this period there were internal processes being undertaken to secure funds and services to deliver additional support into TA to engage with people sleeping rough and connect them to supports and housing assistance.

However, the concern of the SHSs who participated in this report was those decisions to increase outreach activities were delayed and seemingly fell far short of what was occurring in other jurisdictions. SHSs interviewed for this report indicated they identified the risk of COVID-19 to their clients several weeks prior to the NSW Government's announcement of its intention to provide temporary accommodation to people who are sleeping rough on 27th of March.

One interviewee from a SHS outlined:

Part of the frustration at the beginning was that the sector was very much aware of what was happening elsewhere and were very concerned about managing this and needed guidance.

Peak agency representatives interviewed for this report highlighted the actions taken in other states:

we were looking at what Victoria was doing and at that stage, Victoria was well ahead of us in terms of responding to COVID as well.

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Local government agencies interviewed for this report also recalled concern about the delay in coordinating outreach to people who were sleeping rough:

We were half expecting that DCJ were about to announce, like, a Martin Place type, but a temporary accommodation type deal. But we were not hearing much. So, there was, I think, there was a bit of concern about 'What's going on?' basically. And not just from us. So, stuff may have happened, but it wasn't clearly communicated.

Peak agency representatives interviewed for this report indicated they commenced advocacy to DCJ in early March to provide temporary accommodation to people who were then sleeping rough. On 13th March 2020, Homelessness NSW went public with its request for the NSW Government to implement additional measures to protect people sleeping rough during the pandemic. CEO Katherine McKernan told *The Guardian*:

What we've been asking for is a coordinated plan to look at not just people sleeping rough, but also people in crisis accommodation, to help assist services [to] plan if there is isolation that needs to happen (Banister, 2020).

Heightening these concerns was the fact by 13th March more than 60 people in NSW had been diagnosed with COVID-19 (Banister, 2020).

4.4 Conclusion

The first cases of COVID-19 in NSW were reported on 25th January. By 13th March, at least 60 people in NSW had been diagnosed with the virus. This presented a particular risk to people who were sleeping rough in inner city Sydney and throughout NSW. To its credit, DCJ continued to coordinate outreach services to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney during this period. However, SHSs were concerned about a delay both in receiving information from DCJ around service delivery to their client and in increasing outreach activities beyond business as usual.

On 27th March, the NSW's Government's COVID-19 stimulus package included significant funding to provide temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough. Chapter 5 provides details of this package and its initial implementation in inner city Sydney.

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5.CHAPTER FIVE - FIRST MEASURES TO HOUSE PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH IN NSW- 27TH MARCH – 9TH APRIL 2020

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 4, the NSW Government responded quickly to the arrival of COVID-19 primarily through adoption of restrictions on outside gatherings and enforcement of stay-at-home orders. However, stakeholders interviewed for this report identified concerns with the delay in DCJ increasing its outreach services to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney.

This Chapter provides an overview of the period from the announcement of an NSW Government stimulus package on 27th March until the 10th of April (when support services were first coordinated for people residing in temporary accommodation).

As with Chapter 4, this Chapter draws on both publicly available media releases and policy statements released by DCJ and firsthand empirical data drawn from government representatives, SHSs and peak homelessness agencies. It also captures the experiences of people who were formerly rough sleeping who accepted offers of temporary accommodation during the pandemic.

5.2 Events and NSW Government responses in this period

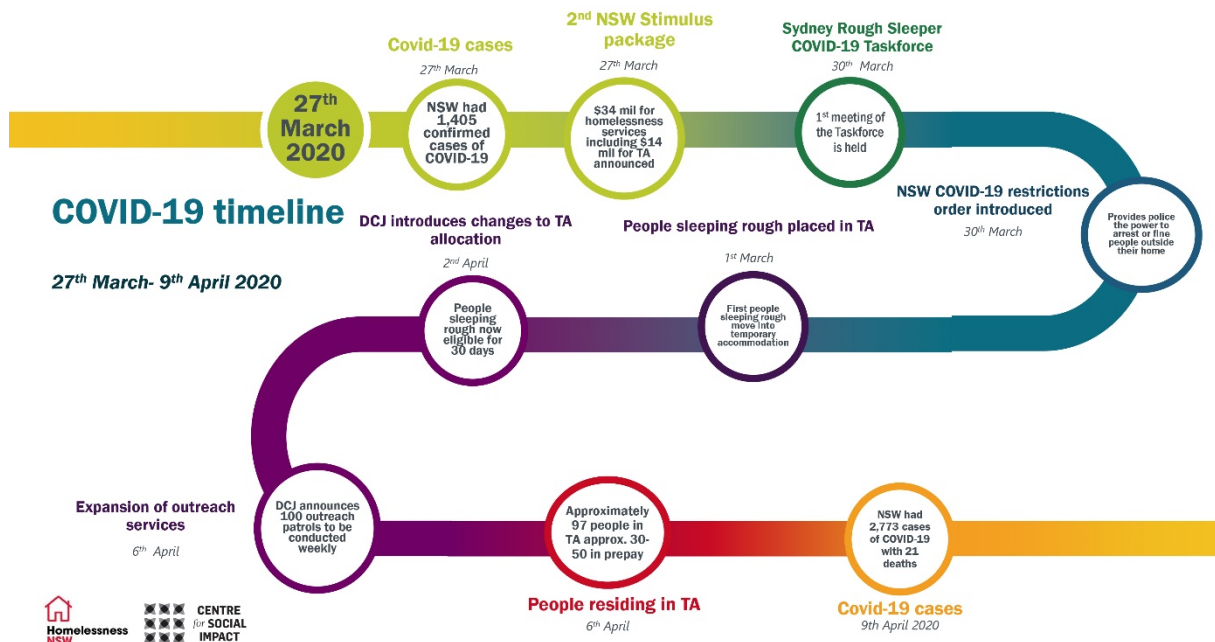


Figure 2: Timetable of events 27th March- 9th April

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5.2.1 - 27th March-: NSW second COVID-19 stimulus package

On 27th March, NSW had 1,405 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (NSW Health 2020).

After advocacy from peak agencies and SHSs, on 27th March, the NSW Government announced a funding package of over \$34 million for homelessness services including \$14 million specifically for the expansion of temporary accommodation services for those needing assistance (NSW Government a, 2020). In announcing the funding package, the then Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services Gareth Ward outlined that:

This additional funding will provide capacity to accommodate thousands more people, including flexibility to accommodate rough sleepers for as long as is necessary to protect them at this time... (Thompson 2020).

As noted by a government interviewee, following the announcement on 27th March, DCJ staff were instructed to:

...[do] whatever within our power we could do to secure accommodation for people that were sleeping rough across the state...to protect people in those situations as much as protect the wider community from further transmissions. We were basically...asked, if we could prepare a response within, literally, 24 hours and have as many people off the streets as we possibly could within the week following and, you know, the immediate time after that.

The funding provided by the NSW Government in response to the onset of COVID-19 enabled DCJ to pre-purchase over 380 hotel rooms and for three months with 22 different accommodation providers across metropolitan Sydney (NSW Audit Office 2021). These hotels had considerable vacancy during this period due to the closing of international borders (Sean, 2020).

As part of its accommodation response, DCJ classified these new accommodation as ‘post-pay’ hotels, with the previously contracted providers classified as ‘pre-paid’ hotels.

5.2.2 - 30th March-: Ministerial directives First meeting of the Sydney Rough Sleeper COVID-19 Taskforce and further public health regulations introduced

On 30th March, the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services directed DCJ to move clients out of large homelessness crisis facilities (congregate care) to enable those accommodation services to adhere to social distancing requirements (NSW Audit Office 2021).

Foundational in the efforts to accommodate people who were sleeping rough and in congregate care was the establishment of the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce (the Taskforce) on 30th March 2020. As one government stakeholder detailed:

at the beginning in March, DCJ could see that we needed to pull all of the key players together to be able to collaboratively problem solve how we would support people sleeping rough on the street.

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The Taskforce was established by DCJ, with other members including the Sydney Local Health District, South-Eastern Sydney Local Health District, St Vincent’s Hospital Network, City of Sydney Council, NSW Police, Community Housing Providers, SHS providers (Neami National, Mission Australia, The Salvation Army, Wesley Mission, St Vincent de Paul Society, The Haymarket Foundation) and peak bodies (Homelessness NSW, DV NSW, Yfoundations, Public Interest Advocacy Centre). Lived experience representation on Taskforce was coordinated by Neami National. (See Figure 3).

SYDNEY ROUGH SLEEPING COVID-19 TASKFORCE

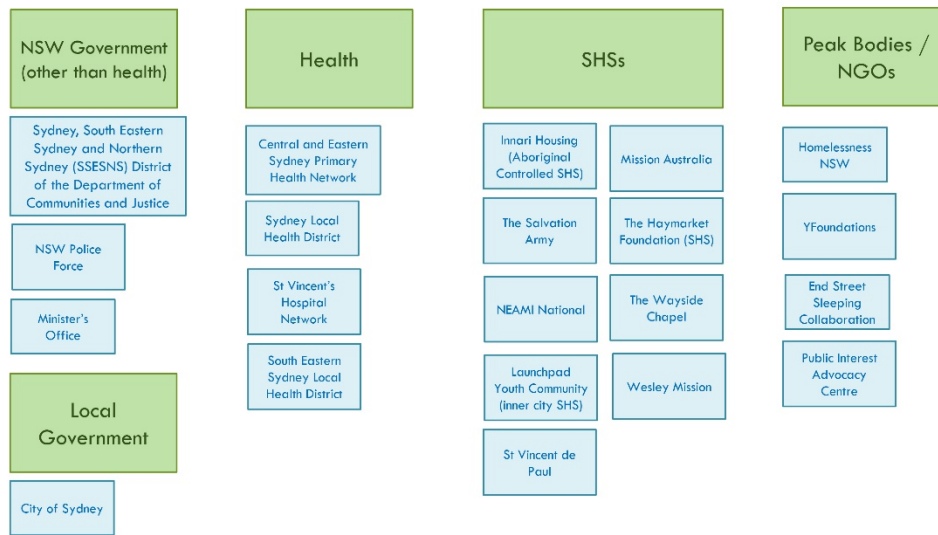


Figure 3: Composition of the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce

The role of the Taskforce was to coordinate the engagement of people who were rough sleeping and to move them into accommodation with health and welfare support (NSW Government 2020). To facilitate this, the Taskforce established working groups overseeing different components of support for those in temporary accommodation, including Outreach; Support and Care Coordination; Food Security; Accommodation Exits; Accessing NDIS; and Working with Aboriginal people (see Figure 4).

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SYDNEY ROUGH SLEEPING COVID-19 TASKFORCE GROUPS



Figure 4: Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce – taskforce groups

As noted in the NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament, Responses to homelessness (NSW Auditor-General Report) these Taskforce's working groups facilitated collective efforts to better support people in temporary accommodation (NSW Audit Office 2021).

On 30th March 2020 NSW Government passed the Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order 2020 ('the Order') under the provisions of section 7 of the Public Health Act 2010. The Order provided police with the power to fine or arrest people caught gathering in groups of more than two or for being outside of their homes without a "reasonable excuse". Whilst s14 specifically exempted people experiencing homelessness from the order, (City of Sydney, 2020), SHSs and peak agencies were concerned that the people sleeping rough would be vulnerable to receiving fines (Opray, 2020).

5.2.3 –31st March- DCJ publishes 'Guidelines Homelessness Accommodation and COVID-19.

On 31st March, DCJ publishes *Guidelines for Homelessness Accommodation and COVID-19*. These guidelines were produced in consultation with NSW Health and the Homelessness peaks and provided tools and techniques to help the management homelessness accommodation sites for adults and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. (NSW DCJ 2020a)

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5.2.4 – 1st- 2nd April -: First people sleeping rough accommodated in hotels, introduction of flexibility in DCJ policy

On 1st April, DCJ and the Taskforce began to place people who had been sleeping rough in inner city Sydney (contacted through increased assertive outreach) into temporary accommodation.

On 2nd of April, DCJ indicated changes to the numbers of days under which people experiencing homelessness could access temporary accommodation. Prior to the pandemic, under DCJ policy individuals were first provided with two nights' accommodation and support, then were required to attend the relevant Departmental office for a full housing needs assessment, which may include an extension of temporary accommodation. Pre-Covid-19, people were eligible for 28 days temporary accommodation per financial year. After 3-4 days a person in temporary accommodation would be required to re-apply. (NSW Audit Office 2021).

However, on 2nd April, DCJ implemented 'relaxed policy provisions' in relation to accessing the temporary accommodation system. The relaxation of rules included three important changes to the provision of temporary accommodation to people who were sleeping rough:

1. Enabling people who self-identified sleeping rough through NSW to access 30 days of temporary accommodation 'straight-up'. This policy had previously been applied in inner-City of Sydney but from April- June was extended throughout NSW.
2. Excluding temporary accommodation taken prior to April 1, 2020, when calculating entitlements.
3. Extending temporary accommodation entitlements beyond 30 days if the applicant was engaging in DCJ services (NSW Government 2020).

Other categories of people experiencing homelessness and others in need of accommodation were initially only eligible for only 5 days of temporary accommodation before the cap on assistance was lifted for all clients (with some exceptions including temporary visa holders).

The limit of 28 days temporary accommodation per financial year was removed until 1st July 2020. (NSW Audit Office 2021).

5.2.5 – 6th April -: Expansion of outreach to people sleeping rough

The successful coordination and commitment of DCJ and other agencies in the Taskforce led to the rapid expansion in the assertive outreach patrols undertaken in inner city Sydney. On 6th April, the NSW Government announced its intention to undertake over 100 weekly homelessness outreach patrols to ensure people sleeping rough in Sydney were provided access to accommodation (Department of Communities and Justice, 2020). These patrols were jointly conducted by DCJ staff, specialist caseworkers and health professionals (City of Sydney, 2020). Screening questions in relation to COVID-19 were asked prior to any engagement, with St Vincent's Health creating documents with advice on when to send someone for testing which were used by assertive outreach services.

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If a person who was rough sleeping indicating they wished to accept temporary accommodation, members of the Taskforce (or the person themselves) contacted Link2home (the state-wide homelessness information and referral telephone service) who would coordinate the allocation of temporary accommodation.

By 6th April, The Taskforce estimates that approximately 97 people were residing in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney, although it is unclear how many of these people were previously sleeping rough (Homelessness NSW, stakeholder interview, 2020).

5.2.6 -: COVID-19 cases in Australia and New South Wales

On 1st April international cases of COVID- 19 exceeded 820, 000 with 40, 500 deaths with 4,864 cases and 21 deaths in Australia (Woods, 2020). On 9th April, NSW had 2,773 cases of COVID-19 with 21 confirmed deaths (NSW Health 2020).

5.3 Strengths of the measures in this period

5.3.1 Housing of people sleeping rough in temporary accommodation

For all the limitations (detailed below and throughout the report), the most important and successful feature of the NSW Government's approach was the number of people whom it was able to house safely during the pandemic. As outlined in the Australian Homelessness Monitor it is impossible to overstate the importance of so many people who were sleeping rough being housed with safety and dignity during the initial stages of the pandemic (Pawson et al., 2020). Compared to responses in international countries (see Figure 1), there was no recorded deaths or cases of COVID-19 among people who were sleeping rough in inner city Sydney or greater NSW. Given the high vulnerability of people sleeping rough to COVID-19, the NSW Government (and DCJ as the primary driver of this policy) deserves considerable credit for implementation of a large-scale accommodation response to this cohort.

5.3.1 Use of higher quality temporary accommodation providers (post-pay)

As outlined in 5.2.1, the closure of international borders facilitated DCJ to register higher quality hotels as temporary accommodation providers.

Temporary accommodation in NSW is generally offered in 'low-cost motels or caravan parks' for clients to act as a 'bridge' until permanent accommodation can be obtained (Homelessness NSW, 2016). Much of this accommodation has long been identified as poor quality and, particularly as unsafe and unsuitable for women escaping domestic violence (Homelessness NSW, 2020).

One SHS sector interviewee who commented on this pre-COVID-19 standard of temporary accommodation said that DCJ:

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...don't have an audit of quality, they don't look at safety issues, they don't actually ensure that the accommodation that they're providing for people under temporary accommodation is appropriate and keeps people safe, basically. And in the inner city pre-COVID, it was not high-quality accommodation. People often chose to sleep rough rather than use temporary accommodation ...

DCJ notes that there are several processes to assess new accommodation providers and existing providers- particularly when issues have arisen. However, SHS stakeholders have indicated that this information is not publicly available, or results of the assessments known to SHSs.

One person who was formerly rough sleeping who was interviewed for this report shared the following experience of staying in temporary accommodation prior to COVID-19:

It was just filled up with criminals and that, people that have just come out of jail and stuff like that. They were breaking into my room. There was one instance where next door to me, the guy's girlfriend must've locked the door and I woke up and he's smashing the door in with a golf club. I was just fearful.

During the pandemic, NSW mirrored the approach of Victoria and South Australia and placed some of people sleeping rough in hotels of a much higher standard than traditional temporary accommodation (Cohen & Mitchell, 2020). As one representative of a SHSs who was interviewed for this research observed:

One of the advantages [of COVID-19] though is that suddenly DCJ were moving away from their traditional dodgy [temporary accommodation] hotels that were unsafe ... and suddenly accessing normal hotels...they were safe, they were secure, they had their own bathrooms, and I think that's shifted the way of thinking for like what to expect if you are in temporary accommodation.

As is detailed above, the higher quality or new hotel providers were labelled as post-pay accommodation. The positive impact of higher quality accommodation on engagement of people who were sleeping rough was also recognised by government stakeholders. One government interviewee noted:

a lot of people have refused to engage or move into temporary accommodation because they believe the standard of accommodation that we provide them is unsafe...So for us to be able to say, "Hey, we've actually got a room for you at the Holiday Inn at Potts Point and you're going to get a meal with it", was a lot more favourable with people than - than maybe it was in our engagement before.

The role of higher quality temporary accommodation in leading people to accept support for the first time was demonstrated in qualitative interviews conducted with people who were housed in temporary accommodation during the pandemic. One person who was formerly rough sleeping detailed:

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The quality of where I am at the moment, fantastic. Yeah, above and beyond. I don't want to leave... It's mint condition, so it's up to me to hold it in mint condition, which is great to have some kind of responsibility.

Another person who was formerly rough sleeping and who was placed in temporary accommodation shared:

I cried when I first got there. I don't know if others have spoken about it or said much about it, but it was nothing that I was capable of on my own, you know.

For this interview participant the sense of pride in the temporary accommodation was key in his decision to accept permanent accommodation after many years sleeping rough:

It just gave me like this ambitious determination sort of feeling. Yeah, I just felt so safe and [it was] enough to really push [me] forward, you know, [into] getting my own place....I was really appreciative of the idea of putting, you know what I mean, people in temporary accommodation...into a resort style place, you know.

Encouragingly many hotels who provided accommodation during the COVID-19 period are continuing to be registered temporary accommodation providers. As one government stakeholder detailed:

There is a whole heap of new temporary accommodation providers that agreed to stay on, and that is a wonderful outcome for the system. That is not just for metro. Out of the 22 providers that we added on in metro, 20 have agreed to stay on.

5.3.3 Role of the Taskforce

Interviews conducted with government, health agencies, SHSs and peak body stakeholders all identified the operation of the Taskforce as foundational in the success of the scheme to provide temporary accommodation to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney during COVID-19. As was detailed above, the Taskforce was established on 30th March 2020 and successfully coordinated assertive outreach, accommodation, and support services to those rough sleeping in inner city Sydney.

The NSW Auditor-General's Report highlighted the achievements of the Taskforce in assisting DCJ to:

to implement, and optimise, its supports for people experiencing street homelessness during the pandemic. (NSW Audit Office 2021).

Reflecting on the work of the Taskforce one government interviewee for this report stated:

I've been incredibly impressed by how effective and useful [the Taskforce] is and how the agencies work together to achieve an outcome.

Representatives of SHSs interviewed for this report also highlighted the Taskforce's role in healing past divisions within the homelessness sector. One interviewee identified the collaboration of the Taskforce

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as being a ‘coming together’ for services after distrust within the homelessness sector which had occurred following the *Going Home Staying Home* reforms of 2015. One interviewee indicated:

...it's brought a more collaborative approach within service provision within the inner city, that I think has been somewhat sometimes fractured in a sense when it comes down to funding and what's available and who gets what, and then who's delivering what...

Another interviewee shared that the Taskforce's response to people sleeping rough had demonstrated that:

services can work together in partnership, in ways that they may not have previously, because they needed to. So, I think we've learnt to adapt, we've learnt to be flexible, we've learnt to partner and we've learnt to really harness those partnerships and those working relationships, to do the best that we can at a really difficult time.

Representatives from SHSs interviewed for the project identified the Taskforce as creating new levels of trust and coordination with government stakeholders. One interview detailed:

There was no longer that sense that we're just trying to pull one over them. They [DCJ] actually did shift to say that the sector and workers are doing this because they care and they want a solution, so let's listen and work out how we can solve it.

Stakeholders interviewed for this report also praised the commitment of those on the Taskforce in the middle of the uncertain health implications for them personally during the pandemic:

...in terms of the workers on the ground [the Taskforce] required incredible commitment, because people were putting themselves at risk. We need to remember that too, and they were highly anxious as well about their own health and their own families and all of that. There was no issue around any of that, from DCJ right through to the sector. I think we really do need to give credit to everyone on the frontline around that. It's incredible what they did.

In reflecting on the success of the Taskforce, stakeholders' interview for this report expressed hope that that such collaboration would extend into the post-pandemic period (see Chapter 7).

5.3.4 Flexible application of DCJ policy on temporary accommodation entitlements

The NSW Auditor-General's Report highlighted the importance of the flexible application of DCJ policy as foundational in facilitating the housing of people who were sleeping rough (NSW Audit Office 2021).

This prioritisation of flexibility was noticeably different to how emergency and temporary accommodation rules had been written. As outlined by one government interviewee:

Our normal [business as usual] processes are very prescriptive, very process driven and very regimented and - and for really good reasons, around fair and equitable access.

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As outlined in 5.2.3, on 2nd April, DCJ amended its policy to enable people who were sleeping rough to access 30 days of accommodation ‘straight-up’. According to people who were formerly rough sleeping who were interviewed for the project, previous limits on temporary accommodation caused significant inconvenience and pressure. As one interview participant detailed:

it would be lovely to know where you stand every day rather than to think I have to go to another interview. Then you have to pack your bags up before your temporary accommodation can be reinstated. Out of the 28 days total they give you, you are probably wasting 8 or 9 days going to getting interviewed so you can access accommodation again.

5.4 Limitations of measures in this period

5.4.1 Delay in moving people into temporary accommodation

There was a small but consequential delay between the announcement by the NSW Government (27th March) and the increasing of assertive outreach to people sleeping rough (6th April). As a result, many people who were sleeping rough were without accommodation options and thus at risk of exposure to COVID-19. On April 2nd CEO of Homelessness NSW Katherine McKernan informed the Sydney Morning Herald that people sleeping rough in Inner City Sydney were:

still without shelter and risking COVID-19 transmission due to a lack of co-ordination from government departments, despite hotel chains reaching out to offer their spare rooms. (Thompson 2020)

This delay was also highlighted by SHS representatives interviewed for this report:

It does not sound much, but at that time was a lot. People were vulnerable and exposed on the streets during this delay.

In addition to the health consequences, the passing of the Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order 2020 created concern that those without accommodation could face penalties for being in public spaces. Whilst s14 specifically exempted people experiencing homelessness from the order, (City of Sydney, 2020), SHSs and peak agencies were concerned of increased police interactions with people sleeping rough during this period. (McGowen and Smees 2020).

SHS stakeholders who participated in this report also identified the considerable anxiety among people sleeping rough caused by the stay-at-home direction and the delay in offers of temporary accommodation. One SHS who participated in the report detailed:

People on the streets were highly anxious. You had the stay-at-home direction; the rest of the population were at home, so the streets were deserted, and services were closing. Add to that

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people were afraid of contracting COVID-19. People on the streets knew they were vulnerable to getting it and that its impact on them would be greater. It was a genuinely scary time.

5.4.2 Continued use of pre-paid accommodation

As outlined in 5.3, many people formerly rough sleeping benefited from being placed in higher quality temporary accommodation during the pandemic. However, stakeholders interviewed for this report identified that a considerable number of people who were rough sleeping were placed in accommodation run by traditional temporary accommodation providers or ‘pre-paid’ hotels). In contrast to the interviews with people placed in higher quality accommodation, people placed in these pre-paid hotels spoke of feeling unsafe and often witnessing significant violence. One interviewee in a pre-paid hotel shared the following:

It was just a nightmare mate. It was just out of control. There was one guy outside my unit...who attacked his girlfriend, and I had to pull him off her to try and save her life. I should not have been in that situation.

People residing in the accommodation of traditional temporary accommodation providers also expressed concerns about their ability to adhere to social distancing in often constrained living conditions:

Everything was communal which wasn't real conducive for COVID because it was all shared ... there'd be 30 people in the dining room and tripping over each other in the kitchen, going in and out of the cool room to get your food.

Significantly there was also a distinction in the level of support provided to those in pre-paid hotels. As initially Neami National received no new funding to provide support services (discussed further in Chapter 6), they focused attention on providing support to those in post-pay hotels. People in pre-paid or traditional temporary accommodation would only receive support if they were referred to Neami National by DCJ. Peak agencies interviewed for this report also indicated that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were placed in pre-paid hotels.

5.4.3 Placement of people away from existing support services

The increasing numbers of people seeking temporary accommodation led to hotel accommodation being sourced from outside of inner-city Sydney. While DCJ notes that the number of people accommodated away from inner city Sydney was quite small, there were health implications for those housed away from their usual health support services. One health stakeholder interviewee detailed:

All the inner-city beds were taken up, and they [DCJ] purchased beds at Parramatta and Blacktown, and other places, and were sending people who were really vulnerable, sleeping rough in the inner city, to Parramatta, who had no health support – all their supports were in the city.

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According to this same interviewee, the placing of people in locations such as Parramatta prevented the clients from receiving adequate health and support services. They provided the following example:

I had to send someone who I knew was really unwell out to Parramatta, and there was no way we could follow this person up. he was extremely paranoid. So, we tried to refer him acute mental health services in the area, just to try and follow him up as well, because he had an address, but by the time we were able to get onto them, he'd already left the temporary accommodation, and his whereabouts was unknown.

5.4.4 Capping the numbers of days of temporary accommodation

As noted above, in this period DCJ increased its temporary accommodation entitlements to enable people who were rough sleeping to access 30 days of continuous hotel accommodation, with other categories of people experiencing homelessness entitled to 5 days. During this period, determinations on whether people could extend their stays in hotel accommodation beyond these entitlements was made by DCJ on a case-to-case basis.

While recognising increasing the number of days as a positive, several stakeholders raised concerns about any restrictions being placed upon the number of days people could access accommodation during a pandemic. Peak representatives interviewed for the report said these limitations and the uncertainty of whether their temporary accommodation stays would be extended caused distress and led to many people returning to rough sleeping:

It's hard to remember now because we've got through it, but [people were] very, very anxious about the pandemic, very, very anxious about how infectious it was. And so to not provide people with reassurance about where they were going to be sleeping from night to night or day by day was not really fair. People made decisions in terms of whether they would stay in the hotels based on the lack of information, and often people did return to the street because they also know how the system works. Around 100 people left in a two-and-a-half-week period because of that.

The NSW approach is in sharp contrast to approaches implemented in South Australia which provided greater certainty for former rough sleepers in temporary accommodation. In South Australia, the response was rapid and comprehensive with initially offering 3 month temporary accommodation (Pawson et al., 2020). Similarly in New Zealand, people who were sleeping rough were offered 12 months in temporary accommodation until permanent housing was secured (Graham-McLay, 2020).

5.4.5 Interactions with Link2Home

Stakeholders interviewed for this project also raised concerns about the communication between Link2Home workers and people who were attempting to access temporary accommodation. As detailed above, once a person accepted an offer of temporary accommodation, they were required to contact Link2Home to coordinate the location they were to be placed and the details for moving in. Stakeholders

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interviewed for this report spoke of the inappropriate way Link2Home workers communicated with both people seeking to access temporary accommodation and members of the Taskforce:

Link2Home workers were working from home and their communication with both clients and stakeholders was not trauma informed and was very poor. They kept telling workers and clients different criteria, length of stay and asking unnecessary very re-traumatising questions.

Another SHS stakeholder interviewed for this report indicated that the poor communication between Link2Home workers and clients was present before the pandemic.

With Link2Home [poor communication] par is for the course with Link2Home. They were treating people as if they were trying to beat the system rather than considering the trauma experienced by the person they were speaking to.

5.5 Conclusion

The NSW Government's second COVID-19 stimulus package provided significant resourcing to support an increase in the amount of temporary accommodation available to people who were rough sleeping in inner city Sydney during the initial stages of the pandemic. As stated above, given the high vulnerability of people sleeping rough to COVID-19, the NSW Government deserves considerable credit for implementation of a large-scale accommodation response to this cohort.

The establishment of the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce successfully oversaw the considerable expansion of outreach activities and supported the first people to move into temporary accommodation. Other successful components of the measures introduced in this period was the increase in the temporary accommodation entitlements for people sleeping rough and the introduction of higher quality providers.

However, stakeholders identified several concerns with the housing of people who were rough sleeping in temporary accommodation. This included the short but important delay between the announcement of the NSW Governments approach and the moving of people sleeping rough in accommodation and the continued use of arguable poor quality traditional temporary accommodation providers which also often offered little opportunity to socially distance.

Chapter 6 explores the delivery of health, support, and food services to those who were in temporary accommodation.

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6.CHAPTER SIX – PROVIDING SUPPORT TO THOSE IN ACCOMMODATION- 10TH APRIL – 27TH APRIL 2020

6.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 5, the NSW Government announced its program to provide temporary accommodation to people sleeping rough on 27th March. While assertive outreach and temporary accommodation had been previously available to people who were sleeping rough in inner city Sydney, in the weeks following this announcement, DCJ and the Taskforce greatly increased its outreach to people who were sleeping rough and temporary accommodation offers. Whilst delayed, the increase of outreach and the provision of temporary accommodation to those sleeping rough was welcomed by stakeholders.

Chapter 6 examines the process between 10th April- 27th April by which support, health and other services were provided to people sleeping rough in pre-paid and post-paid accommodation

As with Chapters 4, and 5 the overview of the measures introduced in this period uses publicly available media releases and policy statements from DCJ and firsthand empirical data drawn from government representatives. Analysis of the strengths and limitations of the approach is supported by data drawn from government representatives, SHS's, peak homelessness agencies and people who were formerly rough sleeping who accepted offers of temporary accommodation during the pandemic.

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6.2 Events and NSW Government responses in this period

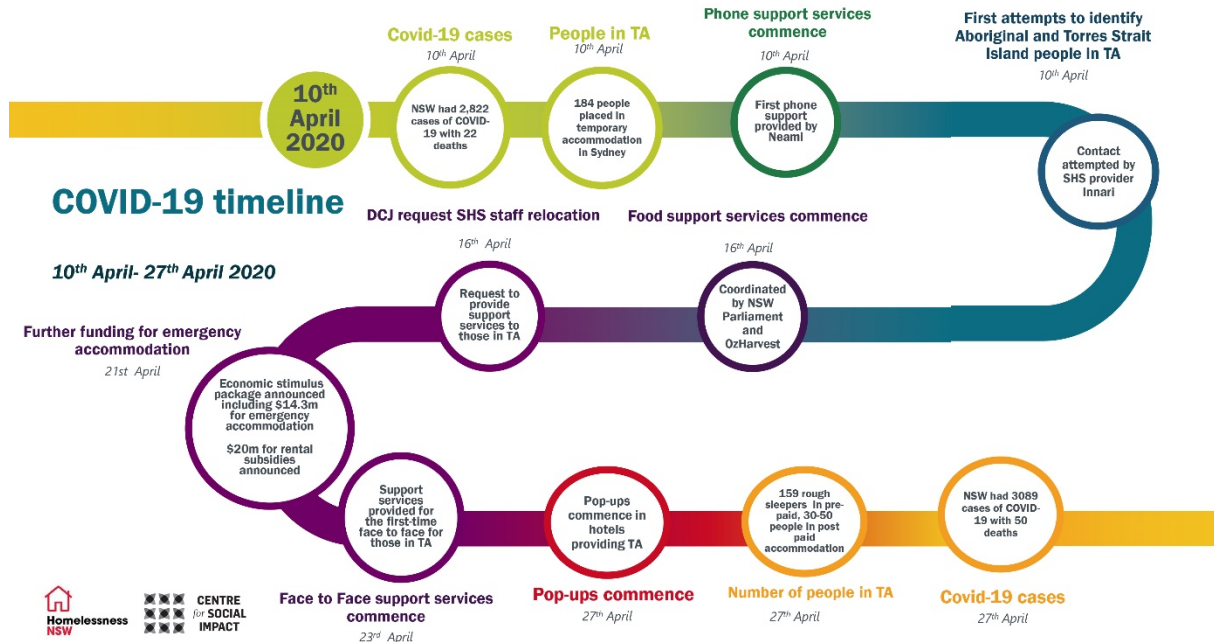


Figure 5: Timetable of events 10th April – 27th April

6.2.1 – 10th April Phone support services commence

On 10th April, NSW had 2,822 cases of COVID-19 with 22 deaths (NSW Health 2020).

On 10th April, as a result of negotiation with DCJ, Neami National commenced providing telephone support to people in temporary accommodation. Neami National were not funded to provide this support but utilised its existing funding services- Way2Home and STEP.

As of 10th April, there were 184 people housed in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney, across 10 hotels. Of these, 127 had moved there from rough sleeping. Of these, 34 people did not have a contact number listed (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021). Over the Easter period, Neami National coordinates phone calls to each of the people sleeping rough – directly contacting those with listed numbers and where no number was listed contacting the people sleeping rough through the hotel reception. The focus of these phone calls was to determine if they had an immediate health or support needs (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

From 10th April, Aboriginal SHS Innari volunteers to contact any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders residing in temporary accommodation to provide a culturally sensitive welfare check in. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021). As information on whether a person was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander was not captured when people moved into temporary accommodation, Innari was able to call only people known to them. (Homelessness NSW, email

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correspondence, February 2021). Initial funding was provided by Homelessness NSW for Innari to conduct this work, with DCJ later allocating funding to support Innari on an ongoing basis.

Following 10th April, people are asked to identify their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status upon intake into the temporary accommodation (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

6.2.2 - 16th April -DCJ requests SHS staff relocation/ food services commence

On 16th April DCJ emailed SHS providers in Sydney and Southern Eastern Sydney districts asking for them to identify staff that could be redeployed to deliver direct client support to people who have been placed in temporary accommodation. DCJ outlined that it required:

workers with appropriate levels of skill to support people in TA, by connecting, linking and supporting them - while in TA, and for the longer term. We expect that much of this support may be delivered remotely, so the workforce does not need to be physically located near the clients (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, April 2020)

Neami National coordinated the allocation of SHS volunteers to people in temporary accommodation and the first face to face support services were provided to clients from 23rd April.

On 16th April, DCJ OzHarvest and the NSW Parliament Catering Team commenced the provision of one meal per day to those in temporary accommodation. The program rapidly expands to providing 1000 cooked and frozen meals per day to people in need during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

6.2.3 – 20th April -Increases in the number of people in temporary accommodation

By 20th April, the Taskforce estimates that 146 people sleeping rough were residing in pre-paid hotels, with a further 30-50 people in post-pay temporary accommodation. An estimated further 87 people were also relocated from larger SHSs into pre-paid hotels (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

6.2.4 - April 27th – Commencement of ‘pop-ups’ in temporary accommodation

On 27th April, following advocacy from peak agencies, the Taskforce commenced ‘pop-ups’ in the hotel foyers of seven inner city hotels used for temporary accommodation to coordinate housing assessment and support services to people sleeping rough (NSW Audit Office 2021).

At the pop-up’s services provided a range of health assistance including COVID screening, health assessments, referrals to health services and case management. A range of other services were provided to those attending these pop-ups including assistance with applying for permanent housing, legal services and providing material support such as phones and food vouchers.

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6.2.5– Number of people in temporary accommodation

On 27th April, Taskforce estimates that 159 people sleeping rough were residing in pre-paid hotels, with a further 30-50 people in post-pay temporary accommodation. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

6.2.6– COVID-19 cases in Australia and New South Wales

By the end of April international cases exploded to 3.1 million with 218, 000 deaths with 6,762 cases and 92 deaths in Australia (Woods, 2020). In NSW, 27th April there were 3089 confirmed cases in the state with 50 recorded deaths (NSW Health, 2020).

6.3 Strengths of the measures in this period

6.3.1 Work of SHS staff in the provision of support services

While there were considerable limitations in the delivery of support, stakeholder interviews highlighted the flexibility of the sector in redeploying to provide support services to people within temporary accommodation. As outlined in Chapter 4, with SHSs determined to be essential services they remained open during the pandemic. The redeployment of staff from SHS to work in the temporary accommodation system placed additional burden on already overstretched sector. As one SHS stakeholder interviewed for this project detailed:

The role of SHS's in delivering support services during this period deserves attention. Pre-COVID, services were already working well over capacity. With the redeployment of staff many people had to work additional shifts to ensure services remained opened.

Funding was allocated in April 2020 to enable Neami to undertake support services via telephone and at 'pop-ups' for those in temporary accommodation. SHS stakeholders interviewed for this report particularly praised the work of Neami in providing this phone support process over the Easter period:

Resources were not available to provide anything other than phone advice [to people in the hotels] and there were also health issues to consider in terms of limiting interaction that put clients and workers at risk of COVID-19. NEAMI were managing it all on their own up until that point and it was phone based. Neami did a fantastic job over the Easter period.

6.3.2 Role of the Pop-Ups

Stakeholders interviewed for this project also highlighted the success of the pop-ups in providing services to those in temporary accommodation. Health stakeholders interviewed for this report detailed that the pop-ups enabled them for the first time to conduct detailed assessments of the support and health needs of people placed in temporary accommodation: Over the course of the temporary accommodation program, over 177 individual 'pop-ups' were conducted, with provider Neami National estimating they

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supported 577 individuals at the pop-ups (across 2032 engagements – some people were seen multiple times).

6.3.3 Coordination of food services

An effective and innovative approach emerged to support the delivery of meals to people in temporary accommodation. As detailed above, the lack of kitchen facilities combined with the closure of cafés and restaurants left some people in temporary accommodation unable to access food. This issue was resolved through a coordinated approach between OzHarvest and the Parliamentary Kitchen which was led and coordinated by DCJ. A government interviewee for this report outlines the process involved in this collaboration:

It was quite a mammoth logistical thing to arrange and OzHarvest were amazing. [Cooking and providing meals to rough sleepers in temporary accommodation] was a new service, it had to be kick started very quickly. We needed hotels that were willing to store and even to move the - the food from their kitchens or their storage to the floors and to - to the people for them to access it.

6.4 Limitations of the measures in this period

6.4.1 Delay and lack of coordination in the provision of support services

A significant limitation in the accommodation of people sleeping rough during the initial stages of the pandemic was in the provision of wrap around support services. Data from the 2019 End Street Sleeping Collaboration's Connection Week report highlights the vulnerabilities of the Inner-City Sydney rough sleeper population which was placed in temporary accommodation. Of the 390 people experiencing homelessness in inner city Sydney who participated in the data collections for the report, 75% report a mental health diagnosis, 63% identified having problematic use of substances and 22% an intellectual/learning disability (End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2019a).

Given the complex needs presented by many people sleeping rough, the placement of people in temporary accommodation by HOST and HART prior to the COVID-19 pandemic would be undertaken following a detailed assessment of their health and support needs. As one stakeholder interviewed for this report details:

Pre-Covid most services if you are putting someone into temporary accommodation, you will usually have like a registration process...So we know who they are, what their needs are and how and where to follow up with them. [Without this] you do not know what risks are associated with any person going into temporary accommodation. Whether its risk of isolation, suicide or self-harm, their risk of overdose.

However, the need during the pandemic to rapidly place people into accommodation led to no needs assessments or triaging being undertaken by DCJ. One interviewee who was from a service involved in Taskforce said:

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Priority was pretty much to get people straight into temporary accommodation. It happened so quickly which was fantastic that we managed to get so many people off the streets into temporary accommodation. But what happened was there was no information really gathered at that point when someone went into temporary accommodation.

Whilst this decision is understandable in the context of COVID-19, it created significant problems for the services which were eventually contracted to provide support services. As one SHSs interviewee recalled, as a result:

...we were kind of almost playing catchup to this knee-jerk reaction – throw everyone inside, and then find out later how to best meet their needs...

Another stakeholder shared:

Suddenly you had, hundreds of people extremely complex and vulnerable people in temporary accommodation. We did not know who they were, we didn't know what their physical health, mental health needs were. Whether they were linked with other services or not. We had none of this information.

A second issue with the provision of support services was the considerable delay before they were provided to those in temporary accommodation. When people who were sleeping rough began to move into the accommodation in early April, no SHS or health agency was resourced to provide support services for the additional clients. As one peak agency stakeholder interviewed for this report detailed:

The delay in providing support stemmed from a lack of planning from the outset re collating information from people referred into the hotels – there were multiple lists of names but no further information regarding support or health needs or history of homelessness. It was therefore difficult to contact clients. The other issue was resourcing – NEAMI did not have the resources and had not received additional funding at that point to provide support to all clients and other services had also not received any resourcing to do this.

The lack of support services for those in temporary accommodation created concern amongst SHS services. As one SHS stakeholder interviewed for the report detailed:

There was huge concern across the sector that over the Easter long weekend clients would become concerned about the pandemic and need support around a range of issues and so we all pushed for phone advice being put in place to help manage this.

With a large cohort of vulnerable people in temporary accommodation without support, on 16th April DCJ wrote to SHSs to request staff be redeployed to provide (face-to-face) support services (Homelessness NSW, 2020). It was not until this re-deployment of SHS staff commenced on 23rd April that many people who were in temporary accommodation received support services for the first time.

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SHS representatives interviewed for this report highlighted the highly vulnerability and complex conditions of many of those placed in temporary accommodation without support:

You had very vulnerable people with complex health needs in accommodation without support for several weeks. That's not good enough and really created trauma for some of those in the hotels.

Health services interviewees supported the view of SHSs that by the Taskforce not collecting information on intake left many people vulnerable to severe health consequences:

...[they] were at risk of overdose, or risk of falls, or seizures, due to their reduction in alcohol volumes, so a lot about safety presented difficulties accessing treatment and mainstream care.

6.4.2 - Lack of cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients

Prior to the pandemic, there was an increasing number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney. Findings from the End Street Sleeping Collaboration's Connections Week Survey conducted in late 2019 found that 15% of the 363 people experiencing homelessness who were surveyed at the time in Sydney identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2019a).

At the commencement of the pandemic, to ensure cultural safety, SHSs working with Aboriginal clients recommended that all people who are sleeping rough who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander be offered housing together in a separate hotel (Homelessness NSW, 2020). However as noted in 6.4.1 the approach adopted by DCJ led to rapidly placing people in temporary accommodation without collecting detailed information about them. This included information on whether they identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A SHS interviewee recalled that as a result:

Aboriginal outreach services were enthusiastic to go in and provide support, [but] they could not actually find out if someone was Aboriginal or not.

As outlined in 6.2.1, over the Easter period Aboriginal SHS Innari were provided a list of names of those in temporary accommodation to identify names they recognised. Another SHs interviewed for this report detailed:

Support for Aboriginal clients wasn't happening, and you had only a handful of Aboriginal workers trying to work out where everybody is. It took weeks and weeks of requesting data of the temporary accommodation lists, where everybody was on there, to come to the Aboriginal workers so they could identify who was staying in the hotels...

Following 10th April, people are asked to identify their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status upon intake into the temporary accommodation. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021). However, the lack of identification and culturally appropriate support prior to this date had considerable impact upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in temporary accommodation. A peak agency interviewed for this report detailed:

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The delay in support meant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not holistically supported. This meant a lot of people went back on the street.

6.4.3 Lack of pre-planning in relation to the provision of food services

While the eventual coordination of meals to those in temporary accommodation was a considerable achievement, stakeholders interviewed for this report expressed frustration that there was not awareness and greater pre-planning in relation to the provision of food to those in temporary accommodation. One agency involved in the Taskforce recalled that it took several weeks to identify and develop solutions to the lack of food availability for those in temporary accommodation:

We came back from Easter and we asked, we were like, “What’s happening with food?” And everyone had been in there for at least two weeks by that point. And then, it took us another two weeks to get it to happen. So, I’d say four weeks without food, really...

DCJ developed a solution to this issue on 16th April by coordinating a partnership between OzHarvest and the NSW Parliamentary Kitchen to prepare and delivery one frozen meal per day to those in temporary accommodation (NSW Parliament, 2020). However, further complications emerged when it became apparent that several of the hotels did not have microwaves to enable the provided food to be reheated and consumed. One SHS representative interviewee spoke to the issue of microwaves and the quality of food in general:

There was no consideration of like having to get microwaves and there was no sort of fresh food or vegetables, let alone options for dietary requirements.

SHSs interviewed for this project indicated that this lack of access to food led to some people in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney leaving:

I would ring every hotel and get an understanding. And they would be saying, “Yeah, people are really anxious. They are coming down to the desk. They are not sure what’s happening. And some [people] were leaving, they were leaving.”

The issue of provision of food and lack of access to cooking facilities raised the recommendation by SHSs stakeholder:

...if we had to do that again, strong recommendations around trying to find the hotels that would have more of a kitchenette option.

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6.4 Conclusion

This period saw the introduction of support, health, and food services to those in temporary accommodation. The NSW Auditor-General's Report correctly highlights the achievements of DCJ in implementing support services support services for rough sleepers in temporary accommodation who wanted assistance (NSW Audit Office 2021).

However, for the eventual success of the implementation of support services, their initial delivery was done in a delayed and uncoordinated manner. Whilst this uncoordinated delivery can be attributed to the to the uncertain and fluctuating nature of the early period of the pandemic, it had considerable impacts upon the well-being of those placed in temporary accommodation.

Chapter 7 examines the refinement of service delivery in the period 28th April until 8th June announcement of the *Together Home* program.

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7.CHAPTER SEVEN – TOWARDS TOGETHER HOME – 28TH APRIL- 8TH JUNE 2020

7.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in Chapter 6, there was insufficient coordination in the delivery of support and health services to former rough sleepers in temporary accommodation.

Chapter 7 examines the refinement of service delivery in the period 28th April until 8th June. The Chapter concludes with commentary on the *Together Home* initiative and its importance in securing long term housing for those people formerly rough sleeping who were placed in temporary accommodation.

- 7.2 Events and NSW Government responses in this period

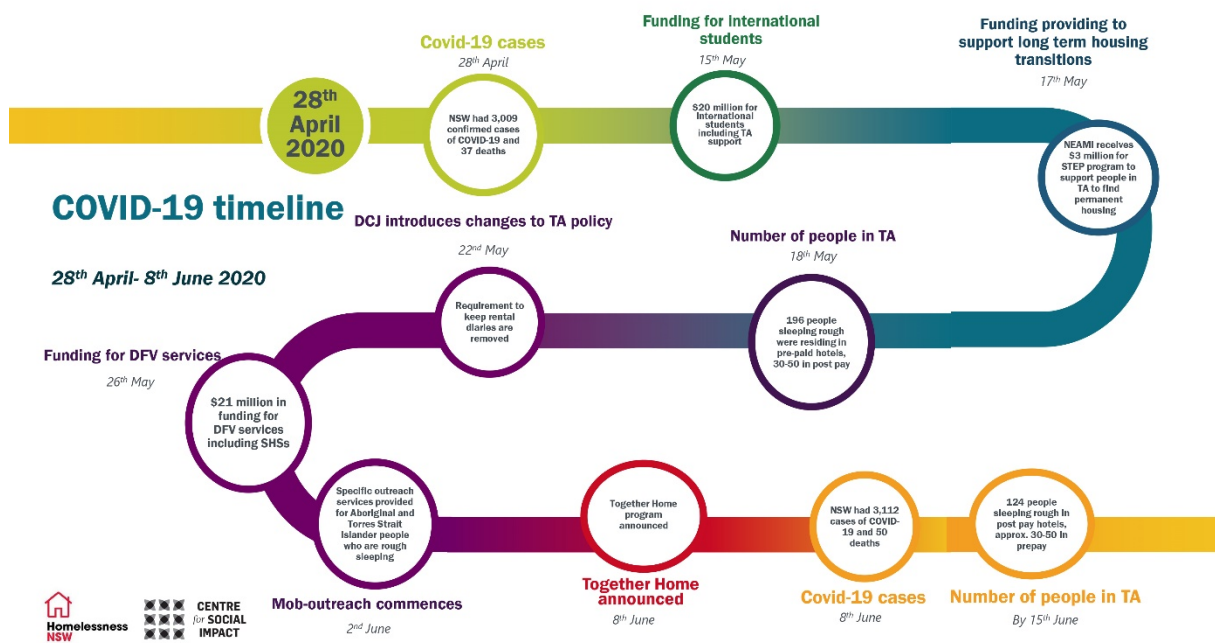


Figure 6: Timetable of events 28th April -8th June

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7.2.1 – 28th April- Cases of COVID-19 in NSW

On 28th April, there were 3,009 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 37 deaths.

7.2.2- 15th May- Temporary accommodation to international students

On 15th May, the NSW Government announced a \$20 Million *International Student COVID-19 Crisis Accommodation Scheme* which provided vulnerable international students with temporary accommodation for an initial period of 12 weeks (with a possible extension to 20 weeks) (NSW Government, 2020a).

7.2.3- 17th May- Funding to support transitions into longer term housing

On 17th May, the NSW Government also provided an additional \$3 Million to Neami National to provide casework support across metropolitan Sydney to support people sleeping rough from TA into longer-term housing pathways (DCJ, 2020b). In announcing this funding package, the then Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services Gareth Ward outlined that:

Our intense work since the beginning of April has resulted in many people sleeping rough accepting the offer of temporary accommodation for the first time in their lives. While this is a positive outcome, now that these people have a roof over their head and a safe place to stay, we want to work with them to plan and, where we can, assist them to secure a safe and stable home (DCJ, 2020b).

7.2.4- 18th May- Number of people in temporary accommodation

The Taskforce estimates that 196 people sleeping rough were residing in pre-paid hotels by 18th May. Note that this figure with a further 30-50 people in post-pay temporary accommodation. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

7.2.5- 22nd May- Removal of requirements to keep rental diaries to re-apply for temporary accommodation

Following advocacy from peak agencies, on 22nd May, DCJ implements temporary changes to its evidentiary requirements (including removal of the requirement to keep rental diaries) for those seeking to re-apply for further temporary accommodation. (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

7.2.6- 26th May- Funding of frontline Domestic and Family Violence services

On 26th May the NSW and Australian Governments announced \$21 million in funding for frontline Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) services including for SHS Women's refuges (NSW DCJ, 2020). In announcing the funding, NSW Attorney General and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Mark Speakman detailed:

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Strict health orders in recent weeks have told people to stay home to help slow the spread of COVID-19. But domestic violence victims don't have a safe home to begin with, so more have sought assistance and are presenting with more complex needs.

7.2.7- 2nd June- First 'Mob Outreach Pop up' to Aboriginal people sleeping rough occurs

On 2nd June, the Taskforce's Aboriginal Homelessness Coordination Group hosted the first Mob Outreach Pop up in Belmore Park. The Mob Outreach Pop-up was established to provide COVID-19 testing and education, food and connections with Aboriginal workers (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

7.2.8- 8th June- Together Home Program announced

On 8th June, the NSW Government announced the *Together Home* program (Together Home) a \$36.1m investment by the NSW Government that aims to support people's street sleeping across NSW during the COVID-19 pandemic into stable accommodation, linked to wraparound supports (NSW Government, 2020d). *Together Home* will make available properties leased from the private rental market linked to wrap-around, flexible supports. The program will operate for two years in a partnership between DCJ and Community Housing Providers

In announcing this funding package, Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services Gareth Ward outlined that:

This is the largest single investment made to tackle rough sleeping in NSW. The response will be intensive and pack many months of work into just weeks, as we strive to transition people from temporary accommodation into secure housing.

7.2.9- Number of people in temporary accommodation

By the 15th of June, the Taskforce estimated that there were 124 rough sleepers in post-paid hotels, with an estimated 30-50 in pre-paid accommodation (Homelessness NSW, email correspondence, February 2021).

7.2.10- COVID-19 cases in Australia and New South Wales

By the beginning of June, international cases were more than 6.6 million with 375,000 deaths (Berlinger et al., 2020). While in Australia since mid-April there had been a sustained and relatively low number of new cases reported daily and by May 8 the curve of cases started to flatten (Lupton, 2020).

By 8th June, NSW had 3,112 cases of COVID-19 recorded and 50 deaths (NSW Health, 2020).

7.3 Strengths of the measures in this period

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7.3.1 Commitment to longer term housing of people sleeping rough

The introduction of *Together Home* is a significant contribution to providing people sleeping rough (including those now housed in temporary accommodation) into long-term, sustainable housing pathways. Importantly, the program has both a housing and support component- with Community Housing providers engaged to head lease private properties, with SHS providing wrap around support for participants (NSW DCJ, 2020). In the months following the announcement of *Together Home*, DCJ has commenced working with Homelessness NSW on administering 40 High needs packages with a focus Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. As of October 2020, *Together Home* had provided housing and wrap around support to some 287 people.

7.3.2 Responsiveness of DCJ to sector concerns

While the retention of rental diaries is discussed as a limitation below (see 7.4), DCJ were praised by stakeholders as being responsive and listening to the requests of the sector in relation to its inappropriateness. One SHs stakeholder detailed:

To their credit, while measures were often imperfect there was a genuine sense of listening to the sector. We often had to advocate for changes but the fact we were listened to and our expertise valued was a really welcome and important part of DCJ's response during this time.

7.4 Limitations of the measures in this period

7.4.1 Exclusion of complex groups and temporary visas

A significant limitation of the NSW Government's housing of people who are sleeping rough was its exclusion of those on temporary visas. People on temporary visas often face specific and compounding barriers to accessing support, including their limited access to housing services under DCJ. In New South Wales people on temporary visas are ineligible for social housing and only have limited entitlements to temporary accommodation (Tam & Hartley, 2018). The difficulties faced by those on temporary visas was compounded by the inability of people to travel overseas during the lockdown period and their exclusion from important social security measures such as the Coronavirus Supplement (The Centre for Social Impact, 2020).

As one government interviewee outlined:

Previous to COVID we and our partner agencies might have supported people to go home to their community of origin if that's what they wanted to do. So, you know, fly back to their country of origin or, you know, return to Western Australia or wherever they might want to go. But during COVID that wasn't - isn't possible. So it restricted our ability to support that group of people.

Despite advocacy from the sector, people on temporary visas other than international students were precluded from accessing temporary accommodation until July when the NSW Government announced

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\$2 million in funding to support organisations to give direct emergency relief to vulnerable temporary visa holders who are not eligible for Commonwealth Government income support during COVID-19 (NSW Government).

The exclusion of people on many categories of temporary visas from the temporary accommodation scheme left many without housing options. As one specialist homelessness sector representative said:

...we escalated it very high at DCJ and basically we had to put them on the streets, there was absolutely nowhere or no one would take them...

A local government representative indicated that because of their exclusion:

We were left for about a month there, with the only people out on the street, were the ones either the non-residents or the incredibly complex people, that were potentially less safe being on the street, with less people around...

7.4.2 Continuation of requirements to re-apply for temporary accommodation until May 22

As detailed above, following advocacy from peak agencies, on 22nd May DCJ made positive adjustments to its evidentiary requirements for people seeking to re-apply for temporary accommodation. Prior to this date, there was particular concern that the requirement for completion of rental diaries was negatively impacting upon people in temporary accommodation. One interviewee from a SHS shared the following experience:

In order to extend temporary accommodation people were being asked to provide weekly support letters to say that they were engaging in a service that's relative[ly] straight forward. But then they were being asked to provide rental diaries to show that they were trying to source private accommodation. [Even though] the messaging from the government is, you know, you need to remain indoors and you can't be going out to look for properties.

One person who was formerly rough sleeping and in temporary accommodation during COVID-19 also shared the impact of retention of the requirement to provide rental diaries:

It [was] painful, and particularly in the middle of COVID. They're telling everyone to stay at home, but you've got to keep reapplying. We were on public transport and the virus was a very new thing. We didn't really know too much about it. There was no mandating requiring masks, so we were running around trying to find accommodation. If we didn't keep the diary of potential accommodation, they'd cancel your temporary accommodation, so it was pressure.

SHSs also expressed frustration on the amount of work involved in making applications for clients to expend their stays in the temporary accommodation and the often inconsistent determinations made by DCJ:

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We would write kind of a template of what the last person [from DCJ] would say but then, that wouldn't be the same advice we'd be given the next phone call, so yeah, we never felt like there was any kind of resolve there.

7.4.3 Gradual winding back of COVID-19 flexibility

For all the limitations in the NSW Government's strategy and its implementation, the housing of people sleeping rough into temporary accommodation demonstrated to both government and non-government stakeholders that there was a better way of providing services to people experiencing homelessness. However, from June 2020, DCJ began to revert to its previous 'pre-COVID' positions in relation to the number of days which temporary accommodation could be provided for (with the notable exception in relation to people sleeping rough).

Health agencies and SHS interviewees expressed frustration that many of the positive features of the COVID-19 housing of people who were sleeping rough was already being 'rolled back' in the few months since its implementation. As one interviewee from a health agency stated:

the worst thing is, it's almost gone the other way, because DCJ have got a budget blowout now, so now, they're tightening up even more, so it's now even harder for really vulnerable people to access temporary accommodation

Supporting this position, another interviewee from a health agency shared:

DCJ had done such a good job in demonstrating their capacity to be flexible [but now] it almost feels like by going back to their business-as-usual approach, they are complicit with just sustaining homelessness. You know, the way that we were approaching it through the pandemic, and giving people longer-term temporary accommodation, and providing wraparound supports, it was enabling better outcomes in the long-term, whereas returning to business as usual, we're saying, well, we're okay with this, we're okay with people not getting long-term accommodation, we're okay with people sleeping rough, and that's what it says to me. I think that's really problematic.

However, other stakeholders expressed optimism that the partnerships and practices that began during the pandemic would continue. One health service interviewee shared the following example of the where the Taskforce was able to intervene to assist someone whose application for temporary accommodation had been rejected:

...the consensus [of the Taskforce meeting] was that this [decision] is absolutely not okay, and it was so different to what we've been doing through the pandemic... The whole group kind of just went, it's outrageous, this is not what happens, we need to talk to this person and this person, and it needs to be escalated. The fact that we've kind of become used to what is possible, or what can be possible, I think we were able to respond more strongly.

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During interviews with DCJ stakeholders, there was acknowledgment of reverting to business as usual, as one interviewee expressed:

You're right, there has been, you know, a reversion to some [business as usual], but that's also time and now we're looking at how we use the service sector to still achieve the same sorts of results that we've been able to achieve to date and really use the power of the task force.

While DCJ stakeholders discussed returning to business as usual there was suggestion of implementing the learnings from the response of providing accommodation to people sleeping rough:

...you've talked about reverting back to sort of more BAU processes there is a willingness within the agency, though, too, to look at how we do things differently... We're also looking at how we do things a little bit differently using the learnings that we've got from our street to home programme, and looking at, you know, noticing that those that remain on the street are much more complex than those that we've been able to more readily house; that we need to look at how we things slightly differently to engage them and provide them with housing and support them through that process. So, you know, that's what we're looking at for quarter one next year.

7.5 Conclusion

The NSW Government introduced several key measures in this period, including the provision of \$36 Million in funding to establish the *Together Home* program to provide long term housing solutions for those in temporary accommodation. While an evaluation of *Together Home* is outside of the scope of this report, early indications are that the program is a successful collaboration of the government, community housing providers and SHS.

This period also saw many of the positive aspects of the NSW Government's approach during COVID being rolled back. However, optimism exists between both government and non-government stakeholders that the partnerships and trust established between agencies during the pandemic will continue.

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8. CONCLUSION

The NSW Government's provision of temporary accommodation to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney during the initial stages of the pandemic successfully protected this cohort from exposure to COVID-19. DCJ effectively built on existing infrastructure to rapidly increase the number of assertive outreaches to people sleeping rough and to provide temporary accommodation before offering many permanent, stable housing options. In particular, the Sydney Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce established an effective collaboration between government peak agencies and SHSs to provide accommodation and support to those in temporary accommodation in inner city Sydney.

For all its success, the approach in NSW had several drawbacks. These included a lack of coordination in the provision of support services and food to those in temporary accommodation. Another significant limitation was in the approach's exclusion of complex groups such as people on temporary visas.

However, despite these limitations, stakeholders interviewed for this report expressed concern about the reverting back to pre-COVID-19 policies and practices in relation outreach and support for people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney.

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APPENDIX

Research methods

Literature review

An in-depth literature review was undertaken to inform the analysis of data used in this report. It was conducted using the search term “COVID 19” AND “homelessness responses.” These key words were searched in academic and other search engines, but as this topic was emerging at the time of the review, the sources found were primarily grey literature³. The literature review aimed to identify and examine the approaches taken to providing accommodation to people who were sleeping rough during the COVID-19 pandemic internationally and in other states and territories in Australia. The international evidence included in this review is sourced from Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The review analysed the approaches taken by each country, the types of accommodation offered, how many people were assisted in the response and any feedback regarding the chosen response. The findings were synthesised together to explore what approaches occurred internationally.

To explore responses in the Australian context, the review analysed publicly available media releases and policy statements released by DCJ in relation to the accommodation of people experiencing rough sleeping. This review examined Australian state and territories responses, with a strong focus on Greater Sydney in NSW. Material drawn from webinars by the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness is also included in this report. The report also draws on the findings of the Australian Homelessness Monitor

Primary research

The research also involved two primary research components conducted by the Centre for Social Impact (CSI):

- Workshops with a range of stakeholders including representatives of the Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Health Services, peak body representatives and with NGO and local government agencies involved in the provision of support to those in temporary accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic (5 workshops conducted)
- In depth interviews with people who were currently or formerly homeless and who have currently or previously been in temporary accommodation provided by the NSW Government in Greater Sydney during the COVID-19 pandemic (6 interviews conducted)

A third primary research component was undertaken by Homelessness NSW which involved a workshop with SHS (SHS) providers involved in the provision of accommodation and health services to those in temporary accommodation during COVID-19.

³ Grey literature refers to research that is non-academic, such as government report or documents, industry reports and evaluations.

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Each of these methods is elaborated further below.

Stakeholder workshops

As detailed above, two separate workshop processes were undertaken – one led by CSI, the other by Homelessness NSW. Workshops led by CSI involved group interviews with a variety of stakeholders who were involved (directly or indirectly) in services delivered to assist people who were sleeping rough into temporary accommodation during the crisis. These stakeholder groups include representatives from the Department of Communities and, the City of Sydney, Peak body representatives (Homelessness NSW), and NGO and Health agencies.

The interviews with these groups explored:

- their responses to providing accommodation to people sleeping rough in inner city Sydney.
- if this accommodation was sufficient, safe (both in terms of providing protections from COVID-19 as well as being in environments free from violence and abuse) and culturally appropriate (particularly for Indigenous Australians); and
- the strength and limitations of the responses

The workshop led by Homelessness NSW was attended by representatives from SHS providers who were contracted by the Department of Communities and Justice to provide support services to people who were placed in temporary accommodation during COVID-19.

All these stakeholders played pivotal roles in the response in Greater Sydney to provide accommodation to people rough sleeping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having all their perspectives about the NSW Government response enables analysis of the effectiveness of accommodation responses in Greater Sydney.

Interviews with people who were currently or formerly homeless

In addition to stakeholder interviews, people with a lived experience of homelessness and who had been provided temporary accommodation were interviewed. Participants were recruited through SHS's and community housing providers and received \$50 Coles Gift Voucher for their participation in the interview. Participants were asked to share their experiences of being offered accommodation, if the temporary accommodation and support they received was suitable for them and whether permanent housing had been offered. Six participants shared stories that provided insights into their experiences of temporary accommodation during the crisis. The number of participants selected was based on considerations of available sample and time constraints at the time of this study. While this sample size is small it is sufficient to answer the aim of this research along with other stakeholder interviews it provides a cross section of insights from people involved in the delivery of accommodation. These lived experiences enable understanding of the impact of the responses undertaken on people receiving homelessness responses.

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Data analysis

The stakeholder workshops and interviews with people with a lived experience of homelessness were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed. CSI researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data and identify the key themes in the interviews. These identified themes were compared to each other and the evidence found in the literature to understand the effectiveness of accommodation responses and come to the findings listed in the report.